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ABSTRACT

Anthropological field methods are viewed as a means of reducing the unanticipated consequences of decision-making in institutions of higher education. The conflict generated by the unanticipated consequences of decisions can be reduced by a better identification and a clearer understanding of the norms and values existing in the various subcultures of the institution. Anthropology is briefly described and compared to sociology and psychology, and some examples of anthropological thinking are given. The possible contribution of anthropological field methods to reducing the conflicts facing institutional researchers is examined. These conflicts include suboptimization, goal conflict, goal displacement, and internal conflict. Each is based to a certain extent on the idea that control of information is a kind of power, and that the power institutional researchers have will influence the future of higher education. (Author)

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THE USE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELD METHODS AS A MEANS FOR CONFLICT REDUCTION IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION*

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Abstract

Anthropological field methods are viewed as a means of reducing the unanticipated consequences of decision making in institutions of higher education. The conflict generated by the unanticipated consequences of decisions can be reduced by a better identification and a clearer understanding of the norms and values existing in the various subcultures of the institution.

Anthropology is briefly described and compared to sociology and psychology, and some examples of anthropological thinking are given. The possible contribution of anthropological field methods to reducing the conflicts facing institutional researchers are examined. These conflicts include suboptimization, goal conflict, goal displacement, and internal conflict. Each is based to a certain extent on the idea that control of information is a kind of power, and that the power institutional researchers have will influence the future of higher education.

THE USE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELD METHODS AS A MEANS FOR CONFLICT REDUCTION IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Institutional research can more effectively serve decision making in higher education if it broadens its methodology to include anthropological field methods. In the long run, use of this methodology would reduce conflicts generated at all levels of the organization, increasing efficiency as well as effectiveness. This reduction in conflict would result from a better identification and a clearer understanding of the norms and values existing in the internal and external environment of the institution, the arena in which decisions take place.

Anthropology

Anthropology emphasizes the study of man as a whole, his total way of life. This fundamental proposition is similar to that of systems analysis, i.e., no part of behavior can be fully or accurately understood in isolation, but must be considered in the context of the whole of the social behavior of the group under study. Generalizations about the nature of culture and of man (woman) are arrived at only after a comparison of the behavior patterns in a wide variety of cultures have been examined. Generalization is often not as essential to anthropology as is understanding human behavior in the context in which it occurs.

Data are typically generated by field methods. These include: participant-observation as a means of observing incidents in their natural social context; the enumeration of activities, events or objects to create a documentation of frequency data; and the interviewing of informants to learn institutionalized norms and the status of other individuals. (Zeldich, 1962) Informants can

also be used to learn of occurances which the anthropologist is forbidden to witness, or of occurances which would be disrupted or altered by the presence of an observer.

Finally, anthropology studies culture. The anthropologist's use of the word "culture" is not to be confused with the common use of the word to mean intellectually or artistically refined. The American Heritage Dictionary defines culture in the anthropological sense to be "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population." The anthropologist views culture as 1) a whole system, complete unto itself, 2) a system of learned behavior which is transmitted from other members of the culture, and 3) the characteristic behavior of a group. Furthermore, behavior patterns are selected from a wide variety of possible behavior in accordance with the dominant assumptions and values held by the culture.

The goal of the cultural anthropologist is to selectively record human behavior for the purpose of constructing explanations of that behavior in cultural terms. (Wolcott, 1970) To the extent that the anthropologist is successful, the information which he or she generates about social processes can be used to predict the consequences of events which occur in the culture, whether internally generated like a marriage, or externally generated, like a drought, or contact with another culture. The anthropologist is an empathetic observer, seeking to discover how the people being observed feel about an event from their own point of view.

Anthropological Field Methods

The cultural anthropologist is well aware of the detractors of anthropological field methods. These methods are decried as unscientific, subjective,

non-random and tending to produce non-generalizable data. Furthermore, the methodology is inefficient, since a standard ethnology takes a minimum of two years to produce, (one year for field work, and the second year for analysis and the preparation of a report). Then what unique contribution does anthropology have to offer that other social sciences, such as educational psychology or sociology, don't have?

Anthropologists insist on naturalistic observation. They contend that removal of phenomena from their normal context may distort the phenomena. Psychological research usually entails the use of controls in experimentation. Since the normal social or physical context for behavior rarely can be controlled for intervening variables, subjects are usually studied outside of their normal surroundings. Secondly, much of psychological literature is based on studies by questionnaires, which the anthropologist might use as an adjunct to field work, but not as the sole source of data. The anthropologist views verbal behavior (written or spoken) as only one aspect of behavior, and it must be understood in the context of other indicators of behavior. Third, psychologists usually try to understand individual behavior by dividing behavior into ever smaller units, such as the response of a specific individual to a specific stimuli. Anthropology deals more with the totality of behaviors which both individuals and groups acquire than with the precise process of how these behaviors are acquired.

Anthropology is more akin to sociology than to any other social science. Frequently they overlap in interest in areas such as social organization and behavior. However, anthropologists tend to study a particular culture or subculture in depth, while sociologists examine the more generalized forms of social systems. Sociologists also place more reliance on statistical data

and procedures. The anthropologist emphasizes inductive reasoning and reasoning by analogy while the sociologist (as well as the psychologist) construct deductive theories.

Anthropology is also significantly different from both psychology and sociology in the source of its hypotheses. The source of anthropological hypotheses is the systematized observation of the real world. (Ianni, 1976) This source is radically different from the preconceived notions of how the real world operates which is the usual source of hypotheses in psychology and sociology. Hypotheses, however generated, can be tested by a multi-method approach. (Hill, 1970) It is the generation of meaningful hypotheses to be tested that is usually a more difficult problem in research than the development of tests to indicate the degree of correctness of these hypotheses.

The insurmountable methodological problem for the anthropologist is that each anthropologist is his or her own research instrument. As a trained observer, however, the anthropologist compensates for this problem as much as possible by an awareness that the problem exists. Observer bias limits all experimentation, but the problem is compounded for the anthropologist since the instrumentation (the anthropologist) changes during the course of the experiment.

Anthropologists are often able to generate information through participant-observation that is more difficult or impossible to generate through either questionnaires or interviews. Information that the person who is the subject of a formal interview finds embarrassing is not likely to be brought out in the interview. Information that is incriminating is not likely to appear in responses to questionnaires. Dishonest or illegal practices, sexual relations, and the use of intoxicants fall into these categories Participant-observation,

since it involves an extended study of one group of people, allows the observer to gain the trust of the people being observed, and as this trust relationship grows, anthropologists report that the kinds of information they are given access to also grows. Such information can be useful in decision making, but the distribution of such information might be constrained by the ethical code of the anthropologist.

Other kinds of information may not be incriminating or embarrassing, but members of organizations might prefer to keep this information from their superiors so that their superiors believe they are behaving differently than they actually are. Questionnaries which ask people how they spend their time are likely to generate less accurate information than can be obtained by participant-observation. Less than a 100% return of questionnaires, and strategic responses to questions, are two problems the participant-observer does not face.

General Applications of Anthropological Thinking

Anthropology is storytelling, and as one learns social roles and values from the fables and myths one hears in childhood, so also can people learn about their roles and values by comparing their ways of life with the ways of life of people in other cultures. Such information allows one to reassess one's own values in terms of a much broader context than the range of values in one's own culture.

Here are several examples of anthropological thinking:

(1) People are ethno-centric, and they tend to believe that their particular way of life is the best, and often, the only way of life possible. These are elitist assumptions, and are responsible for the destruction of entire cultures, such as the Mayans or the American Indians. The ultimate

test of a value is force, and in the course of culture contact, might equalled right. Right did not necessarily equal "good" according to our cultural values.

By analogy, a situation similar to ethno-centrism can exist in an organization when professionals value autonomy and administrators value centralization of power. Regardless of which one is good in the abstract, the group which controls the greater power is likely to optimize its own values regardless of the overall good of the institution.

(2) The golden rule goes as follows: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The golden rule for anthropologists goes: "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them." It follows that a person must learn to reward other members of the organization by what they see as rewards, not by what management sees as rewards. The Human Relations school discovered that principle years ago, but some managers still believe that increasing someone's salary will make them work harder or cooperate more, which is not necessarily the case.

(3) Myths are more than stories or childish beliefs, they also form a kind of social reassurance, a device of education, learning, and culture maintenance. (Hoebel, 1966) Higher education abounds with myth. There is the myth that tenure gives a person academic freedom and economic security; there is the myth of collegiality, which Baldridge (1971) seems to have exploded; there are myths that teaching and research are incompatible functions; myths of the absent minded professor; myths that administration is always in conflict with the faculty; myths that research assistants write professor's books; myths that research assistants are paid for doing nothing. These myths are held by different subcultures within the university, and there is likely to be some truth in all of them. For those people who believe in the myths,

they serve the same pattern maintenance function as myths for any other culture.

(4) Laughter, which is a release of tension, can be used as an indicator of what is causing anxiety in that group. A participant-observer can inventory and enumerate the subjects a group of people choose to laugh at, and have one indication of the things about which those people are concerned. Using this information, a decision maker can predict that decisions related to these matters will receive more careful scrutiny from that group than other decisions.

(5) All cultures have rituals which are: "the recurring performance of a standardized set of acts in the belief that the acts are necessary to the maintenance of the status quo or to the achievement of specified ends." (Hoebel, 1966, p.478) Classroom lectures are the most common rituals at institutions of higher education. The replacement of the lecture format with a t.v. monitor or a computer assisted instruction module will affect the status quo of the institution regardless of its impact on the cognitive domain of students.

Anthropological Research As A Means Of Conflict Reduction

The key to understanding how field methods could reduce organizational conflict in an institution of higher education is the focus of field methods on values. The anthropologist believes that by the observation of behavior, the real (as opposed to stated) values of the target group can be understood.

The primary link between field methods and organizational theory is predicated on the notion that the real values of a group determines the real goals those people pursue. In conjunction with the standard data on courses, facilities, finances, the staff, and students, the use of information generated

by field methods will allow a decision maker to better predict the consequences of his decisions. Planning means projecting all the consequences, good and bad, that would arise from alternative courses of action. Perfect planning is not possible, but by definition, only the best information can lead to the best planning. The institutional researcher, in the role of "provider of information" should seek the best information available in order to best provide for the needs of decision makers. Anthropology's major contribution to decision making is to introduce decision makers to potential consequences not considered by other disciplines and methods.

The cost of any research has to be considered in terms of benefits derived. The services of an anthropologist, which might be purchased for $15,000 a year, are small compared to other forms of self-study. An accreditation report for a single college in a university may have an opportunity cost to the staff & faculty of the college in excess of $150,000. The printing costs alone for one such self-study were nearly $10,000.

Even without considering comparative costs, the benefits of anthropological research can be high. Much of the facilities planning in the 1960's which resulted in the over-construction of dormitories was based on demographic studies and enrollment projections. Had the values of the high school students which made up this population been studied, that is, had the values of the population which was supposed to inhabit these buildings been determined, then apartments might have been built instead of dormitories, or the institution might have opted to stay out of the housing business all together. At The University of Iowa there has been an annual and costly debate between the administration, and freshmen and sophomores, about the <u>requirement</u> that freshmen and sophomores live in dormitories. This requirement is necessitated by the

need to pay off the bonded indebtedness which resulted from past planning decisions based on too narrowly defined criteria.

Organizational Conflict

Naturally, field methods cannot be expected to reduce all institutional conflicts. The following sets of propositions do not describe the state of nature, but describe possibilities. Their purpose is to explore organizational conflict as it might exist for the institutional researcher, and to show how anthropological field methods might help to resolve such conflicts.

Proposition 1

a) Institutional researchers control a scarce resource, knowledge.

b) Control of a scarce resource gives the possessor of that resource power. (Power is the ability to affect outcomes of events.)

c) Institutional researchers can use this power to enlarge their operations beyond the needs of the organization to which they belong.

This is a description of suboptimization, the optimal growth of a subunit of an organization which results in lowering the overall effectiveness of the organization in meeting its goals. Field methods cannot effect the extent to which an office of institutional research suboptimizes in an <u>organizational</u> context. It can, however, help an office of institutional research avoid suboptimizing in a <u>methodological</u> sense, e.g., avoid excessive study by one methodology or in one area which results in a less than optimal set of information for decision makers to use.

Proposition 2

a) Institutional research originated in response to an increased demand for organizational efficiency.

b) The goal of institutional research is to increase organizational efficiency, (i.e. the survival or growth of the institution, and a reduction in the cost of operations) and is not concerned with organizational effectiveness (i.e. pursuing truth, excellence, and the creation, assessment and distribution of knowledge).

Proposition 2 is a description of goal conflict, that is, the conflict in purposes between two subunits of an organization, i.e. between institutional researchers and faculty members. Field methods can be used to establish the extent to which the values of these two groups actually diverge. One spin-off from an ethnology (an anthropological description of a culture) of an institution should be value clarification, so that at least people can agree on what they disagree about, and the depth of such a disagreement. This knowledge may result in an overall reduction in conflict within an organization. However, if the conflict in values is deep, distribution of such knowledge may increase conflict in the organization.

Proposition 3

a) The goal of institutional researchers is to provide useful information to decision makers.

b) Institutional researchers spend all their time and energy analyzing data.

Proposition 3 describes goal displacement, the substitution of means for ends. In this instance it is no longer important for the institutional researcher to provide useful information to decision making. The elegance of statistical methods takes presidence over the usefulness of the final product. Anthropological field methods cannot reduce this kind of conflict. In fact, in a short run anthropologists might exemplify data gathering rather than information

supplying. It would probably take a minimum of six months before any significant data would be made available to decision makers. But effectiveness is measured in the long run rather than the short run. There is a methodological corallary to proposition 3.

Proposition 3

b)(1) Institutional researchers use quantifiable data as the source of the information they provide decision makers.

This corallary is based on the notion that what is quantifiable is important to decision makers. There is no reasonable quarrel with this idea. However, one should not assume that only quantifiable data is important in decision making. Institutions of higher education can be considered meritocracies which lack a widely accepted definition of merit. The decisions made about the merit of a person or program or procedure are based on the values of the decision makers and the pertinent information which they have. Since the acceptance or rejection of a proposition is ultimately based on a subjective evaluation of the "good" or "worth" of the proposition, it is illogical to supply only "hard" or "quantifiable" data to the decision maker. Field methods are well suited to providing an alternative, "soft" set of information for decision making.

Proposition 4

a) Institutional research centralizes information.

b) Possessors of this information have power (see Proposition 1, b).

Proposition 4 is a continuation of the argument of Proposition 1, but at a higher level in the organization. As stated earlier, power is the ability to affect outcomes, to determine consequences. Authority is the right to set

goals and initiate activities. Centralization of power differs from centralization of authority, and by definition can have a more serious effect on outcomes. If the information generated in institutional research is not shared equally throughout the organization, the power of information is centralized in the hands of those people who possess the information. If decentralization of power is desirable because it allows for a "better" pursuit of academic goals, then centralization of information, ergo, power, is dysfunctional. This argument is again one of goal conflict. The addition of anthropological information would increase the power of the possessor of the information. This effect might be tempered by the enculturation of the decision maker into non-elitist thinking, in which case the decision maker would not be tempted to try to force his values on other members of the organization (e.g., strive for efficiency at all costs).

Proposition 5

a) Institutional researchers should supply decision makers the "best" information for decision making.

Proposition 5 represents internal conflict for the institutional researcher, because he or she must decide how and where to allocate the scarce resources of time, energy and money in the search for optimal decision making information. Table I lists several (though by no means all) possibilities for research, and each topic implies the need for a different methodology for discovering and processing data. Methodology has a profound impact on the kinds of information institutional researchers can provide decision makers. To accept a methodological status quo has ethical implications (Sjoberg, 1975), to reject it implies risk. The only escape from such conflict is through ignorance or faith.

TABLE I

Topics for the Contents of Institutional Research Studies

Topic	Rationale from Proponents of Each Topic
"The Big Five" (Course, facilities, financial, staff and student data)	This constitutes the nuts and bolts for institutional decision makers. Knowing this information is the key to efficiency.
Decision making theory	It is most important to know how decisions are made at various levels of the institution in order to predict information requirements for decision making.
The history of decision making at the institution	Past behavior is generally the best indicator of future behavior.
Collective bargaining	A decision maker must be prepared to deal with conflicts before they arise.
What constitutes failure in an institutional subunit?	Efficiency and effectiveness are both enhanced when "dead wood" is removed.
Philosophy	Decision making will become consistent and ethical only when administrators understand their philosophical biases and ethical responsibilities.
Values	Understanding the values of the various subcultures of an institution is the best way to predict the consequences of an administrative decision.
The external environment	This is the key survival interface in an organization.
Budgeting	Shifts in budgetary emphasis indicate the real values and the real power bases in the institution which constitute the internal environment for decision making.

Summary

To the extent that institutional research is a profession (Lyons, 1976, p. 3), it must have a clientele. The clientele for institutional researchers are the decision makers of the institution to which the office of institutional research is attached. As a profession, institutional research must also perform a service, and the primary service institutional research performs is the generation of information for use within the institution. As professionals, institutional researchers are ethically obligated to provide the best possible service to their clients.

The arguments contained in this paper lead to the conclusion that institutional research can be improved by broadening the search for information about the institution, and that anthropological field methods provide one means for accomplishing this task. Specifically, information derived from anthropological methodology can give institutional decision makers a clearer understanding of the values of the people affected by a particular decision. Used in conjunction with other information, this knowledge of values can lead to decisions which can reduce conflict in an institution while increasing institutional efficiency and effectiveness.

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